

As we moved last week through the Independence Day holiday, celebrating freedom in various ways, my thoughts have often returned to the experience of the national Holocaust Museum about which I wrote last week. The particular aspect of that experience to which I have returned is the idea of forgiveness.

While I have certainly been wounded and offended from time to time, I have not suffered anything remotely comparable to the Holocaust. There have been aggravating church members from time to time across the years, but never aggressive hostility or betrayal. I haven't experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Yet while there may be a sense in which I have no right to speak of such matters, the smoke from the Nazi ovens still rises obscenely against the screen of my mind, and I wonder about forgiveness.¹

I suspect that you know what I mean. Whatever the nature of your own wounds, you know what it is to have been wounded. Theologian Fisher Humphreys put the matter in context in a recent article in *Christian Ethics Today*:²

"People hurt you for different reasons. We will set aside for the moment the special situation in which people hurt you because you hurt them first. There are at least four other situations in which people can hurt you.

"Sometimes people deliberately hurt you. Even though you have done nothing to harm them, they do something just because it will hurt you. Let us call that **malicious** behavior.

"Sometimes people want to do something and they know that, if they do it, you will be hurt, but they don't care. They're quite willing for you to be hurt if that's what it takes to get what they want. Let's call this **selfish** behavior.

"Sometimes people want to do something and they don't realize that, if they do it, they will hurt you. However, it was their responsibility to be aware of the consequences of their actions, so, when they proceed with it and hurt you, they should have known better. Let's call this **irresponsible** behavior.

"Sometimes people want to do something and there is no way for them to know that, if they do it, they will hurt you. Let's call this **innocent** behavior.

"What these malicious, selfish, irresponsible, and innocent behaviors all have in common is that they all cause you pain that you do not deserve. You know, of course, that you are not perfect, but you also know that nothing you have done warrants this. In short, your pain is unfair, unjust.

"How do you respond to being hurt deeply and unfairly? We know that Jesus has told us that we should forgive those who hurt us, but what does that mean?

¹ There is no shortage of worthy efforts to come to grips with this problem. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, Lewis Smedes, *Forgive & Forget* (a terrible title, but a good book), Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, and www.forgiveness-institute.org.

² Fisher Humphreys, "Forgiveness," *Christian Ethics Today*, Fall 2013, 18-23.

“Forgiveness means suffering in a special sense. In order to forgive, you have to accept two kinds of pain. First comes the pain of being hurt by someone. That is a kind of pain that all of us experience, and there is no way to avoid it all.

“There is another kind of pain also. When you’re treated unfairly, you become angry. No one has to teach you to do this. It is a natural response.

“And, when you are angry because you have been hurt, you want to retaliate. This also is a natural behavior, and many things in our world reinforce it.

“Moreover, I think (and this is controversial) that you are entitled to want to retaliate. It’s only fair. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That balances the scales. That’s justice.

“*But it’s not forgiveness.* In forgiveness you voluntarily embrace the pain of your own anger rather than expressing your anger by retaliating. You could say that you neutralize your anger. You don’t repress or deny it. You live into it, and you live through it, in such a way as to drain the poison from it.

“Here then is our definition: **Forgiveness is accepting the pain caused by people who hurt you and also accepting the anger you naturally feel because you have been hurt, in such a way as to end their destructive power in your life and in the lives of others.**

“Now this is not fair. You didn’t hurt the other person. The other person hurt you. You shouldn’t have to suffer. The person who hurt you should have to do that.

“But in the real world of moral and interpersonal relationships, it is the injured party alone who can forgive, and that means that it is the injured person who must suffer if forgiveness is to occur. . . . Many biblical passages teach that those whom God has forgiven are to experience forgiveness so deeply that it transforms their lives.”

“Forgiveness is something you do in your own heart, and, with the Lord’s help, you can do it no matter what the other person does. Reconciliation, however, is not something you can do on your own; it always takes two people. . . .

Fisher Humphrey’s Small Steps toward Forgiveness:

1. Name the person or group who hurt you and name what they did that caused you pain. Forgiveness can’t be done generically.
2. Live in such a way as to do your enemies no harm.
3. Refuse to stoke the fires of your anger.
4. Ask God to help you to forgive those who hurt you.
5. Begin to pray for your enemies.
6. Be patient while God is at work.

What Bishop Desmond Tutu said about South Africa is true of the entire human race: **We have no future without forgiveness.** May God help us to experience the reality of this grace.

Dave

P.S. I also find the following notes from C. S. Lewis’s sermon “On Forgiveness” in *The Weight of Glory* to be both challenging and helpful. I encourage you to read them thoughtfully.

C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” in *The Weight of Glory*

“To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not nearly so easy as I thought. Real belief in it is the sort of thing that very easily slips away if we don’t keep on polishing it up” (pp. 177-178).

“We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. . . . If you don’t forgive you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it” (p. 178).

“There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says, ‘Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.’ But excusing says ‘I see that you couldn’t help it or didn’t mean it; you weren’t really to blame.’ If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites” (pp. 178-179).

“If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your action needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. But the trouble is that *what we call ‘asking God’s forgiveness’ very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses.* What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some ‘extenuating circumstances.’ We are so very anxious to point these out to God (and to ourselves) that we are apt to forget the really important thing; that is, the bit left over, the bit which the excuses don’t cover, the bit which is inexcusable but not, thank God, unforgivable. And if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves” (pp. 179-180).

“There are two remedies for this danger. One is to remember that God knows all the real excuses very much better than we do. If there are real ‘extenuating circumstances’ there is no fear that He will overlook them. . . . The second remedy is really and truly to believe in the forgiveness of sins. A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in it, from thinking that God will not take us to Himself again unless He is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favor. But that would not be forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it” (pp. 180-181).

“When it comes to a question of our forgiving other people, it is partly the same and partly different. It is the same because, here also, forgiving does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think that it does. They think that if you ask them to forgive someone who has cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out that there was really no cheating or no bullying. But if that were so, there would be nothing to forgive. They keep on replying, ‘But I tell you the man broke a most solemn promise.’ Exactly: that is precisely what you have to forgive. (*This doesn’t mean that you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every taste of resentment in your own heart—every wish to humiliate or hurt him or to pay him out.*) The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God’s forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people’s we do not accept them easily enough. As regards my own sins it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are not really so good as I think; as regards other men’s sins against me it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are better than I think” (pp. 181-182).

“To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.’ We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what He says” (pp. 182-183).

The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know **O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

Week twenty-seven: FINDING THE WILL OF GOD

“Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

As the shadows fall upon Gethsemane, we find our Lord so anguished in prayer that He began to literally sweat drops of blood. His passion was to accomplish the Father’s will for His life. Earlier, He had pointedly addressed this with His disciples by saying, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). Now, on the evening before He would hang on a Roman cross bearing the weight of the sins of the world—it was this desire that consumed Him. That is, “Not My will, but Yours, be done.”

On certain issues God’s will is quite straightforward. For example, Jesus said, “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life” (John 6:40). But what about other issues of life, other crossroads that come our way, demanding our attention and an eventual decision? How do we go about the business of finding out what is really God’s will for us instead of what may simply be a selfish, personal desire? There are some important steps we can take along the way toward finding God’s will.

BE SURE YOU KNOW THE SAVIOR

It stands to reason that if we are on a pursuit to find God’s will in a certain area, first of all we have to come to know Him as our very own personal Savior. Without a saving knowledge of Christ and His abiding life within, a person cannot discern the things of God. These things are, as Scripture says, “spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

BE SURE YOU KNOW THE SPIRIT

Once we place our trust in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to take up residency within us, empowering us for service, helping us “bear witness” with the Spirit of God. When we know Christ as Savior and are being controlled by His Spirit, He becomes our Teacher and will “guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13).

BE SURE YOU KNOW THE SCRIPTURE

When we want to find God’s will, it is essential that we have knowledge of biblical truth. God will never lead one of His followers to do anything that is contrary to the Scriptures.

Along with these three supernatural phenomena, there are three practical ways to find God’s will. The first key word is *desire*. God will not call you to a certain endeavor without first planting a desire within your heart to do that very thing (see Psalm 37:4).

The second operative word is *opportunity*. Just because we have a desire does not necessarily mean it is God’s will for us. If it is God’s will, the desire will be accompanied by an opportunity. Third, we are to keep walking and trust that, if this path or our destination is not God’s will, He will shut the door.

This is exactly what happened on Paul’s second missionary journey. He had a desire and opportunity to go to Asia and Bithynia. But on each occasion God shut the door: “the Spirit did not permit” Paul to go in (Acts 16:7). There was no rebuke. It was simply not God’s will at the moment.

Immediately after this, Paul heard God call him to Macedonia, and he went straight there, totally in the middle of the will of God. The Bible says, “After he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us” (Acts 16:10). The word *concluding* means that it all came together. Paul sought and found the will of God, and the great revival at Philippi broke out as a result.

God does not want to veil His will from you. He is more desirous of your finding it and walking in it than you are yourself. Yes, He has a wonderful plan for your life, and He longs to make His will known to you.